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AUTHOR Patterson, Kathleen A.
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ABSTRACT

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, way to incorporate disability studies into the composition curriculum is to alter the way instructors teach canonical texts. The standard literary approaches to disability are genre studies, which consider disability to be an element of the gothic or the grotesque, and rhetorical studies, which analyze its function as metaphor. Such views of disability need not be ignored. Rather they should be looked at critically. Disability does function in this way in some literature but in other literature disability is multidimensional. In Southern literature, for instance, there are texts that problematize and sometimes directly challenge cultural assumptions about persons with disability. A second way to incorporate disability studies is for the instructor to use texts by "good" writers who are themselves disabled and who write about disability as "models" of good writing. A third way to incorporate disability studies would concern classes organized around multidisciplinary readings. Most of the recent scholarly work in disability studies is in the social sciences. History is also rich in its documentation of recent paradigm shifts in culture's understanding of disability. (Contains an extensive bibliography of disability texts in fiction, poetry, drama, history, sociology, politics, women's studies, and popular culture.) (TB)

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ED 380 811

"Embodied Curriculum": Teaching Disability Studies in the First Year Composition Classroom

Kathleen A. Patterson
University of California, Santa Barbara

When I received my formal invitation to give this paper, enclosed--along with the hotel reservation and the conference registration forms--was the CCCC guidelines for nonsexist language. When I received my formal invitation two years ago to give a paper on disability and identity in Flannery O'Connor's short fiction at the Society for Disability Studies conference, I received a similar sheet entitled "Guidelines for Equitable Presentations."

Printed at the bottom of the page, after practical suggestions for communicating with an audience which would include people with a variety of disabilities and guidelines for avoiding discriminatory language, was a brief statement which I think encapsulates the general point I hope to make today: "While the above suggestions refer specifically to language about persons with disabilities, the same awareness should extend to issues of gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, and so forth." This statement, like the term "disability studies" itself, implies that disability is the same kind of thing as "gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religion, and so forth" and thus deserves the same kind of consideration.

According to the 1990 census, there are approximately 43 million people with disabilities in the United States today. At least 17 percent of the total population are people with disabilities," defined as persons who "have a physical or mental

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impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity," "have a record of such an impairment," or "are regarded as having such an impairment."

One byproduct of advances in medical technology and increased awareness of preventative health care is increased longevity; another is an increased percentage of people who will, by the end of their lives, experience disability first hand. Statistics indicate that people 65 and older are five times more likely to experience significant limitations in mobility and/or self-care than are people 16 through 64. Disability is not necessarily something that happens to someone else.

In the 1970s and 1980s, deinstitutionalization and mainstreaming dramatically changed the way that people with disabilities were "treated" by medical and educational professionals: for example, Public Law 94-142 of 1975 required public schools to provide education for children with physical and developmental disabilities in "the least restrictive environment." In July of 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act, the most sweeping civil rights bill in more than twenty-five years, was signed into law. Some have even called it a "Twentieth-century Emancipation Proclamation for Persons with Disabilities."

All of us who dutifully check our mailboxes and read our intercampus memos are aware of the effect of this legislation on institutions of higher education. Many campuses are undergoing physical changes in order to comply with requirements to provide

access and are implementing administrative changes in order to comply with requirements to provide reasonable accommodation.

These tangible changes are significant, but perhaps even more significant is the paradigm shift that the ADA reflects: slowly, but surely, the "medical model" is being replaced by a "minority model"; disability is being defined as a social relationship instead of a pathology. These concrete and abstract changes reflect and, at the same time, reinforce changing attitudes and behavior. I believe that our curriculum should change as well: that disability studies--like gender studies and ethnic studies--can and should play a significant role in the first year composition classroom. Currently, it does not.

The results of an informal survey I conducted in UC Santa Barbara's Writing Program indicate that almost all of my colleagues would teach texts by and about people with disabilities if they knew where to find them. As I reviewed recently published textbooks, I cannot say I was surprised at how few included these kinds of texts, but I was disappointed.

Texts by and about people with disabilities--the essays of Nancy Mairs, for example--are being included more frequently in composition texts which are organized around rhetorical modes and, in one recently published handbook, an excerpt from Harold Krentz's autobiography, Darkness at Noon, appears in the opening pages to illustrate focussed writing. An article about mainstreaming written by Barbara Gerbasi, the mother of a child who she describes as "afflicted with cerebral palsy and

epilepsy," also appears in a newly released edition of a textbook organized around the elements of argument.

Where texts by and about persons with disabilities do not appear is at least as significant as where they do. They do not appear in popular culture and multicultural anthologies, although selections addressing the cultural construction of illness, in particular AIDS--for example, excerpts from Shilts' And the Band Played On and Sontag's AIDS and its Metaphors--are appearing more and more frequently. The inclusion of these kinds of texts represents a step in the right direction, but I believe additional steps are needed.

Numerous articles presenting guidelines for including of texts by and, especially, about people with disabilities in primary and elementary school curricula have been published in the last two decades. Next to nothing has been written with regard to secondary and post-secondary curriculum development. Given the lack of visibility, and--if the experiences of my colleagues are any indication--the lack of representation of people with disabilities in institutions of higher education, it is imperative that we begin to incorporate texts by an about members of this "invisible" population into our curriculum. I would like to propose four ways to do this.

The first, and perhaps the most obvious, way to incorporate disability studies into our curriculum is to alter the way we teach "canonical" literary texts. The standard literary approaches to disability are genre studies, which consider

disability to be an element of the gothic or the grotesque, and rhetorical studies, which analyze its function as metaphor. I am not suggesting that we ignore that disability functions in these ways. It is a recurrent element in the gothic and the grotesque and it is a conventional metaphor, and to fail to address these functions would be to neglect important tools of literary analysis.

However, in my own work in Southern literature, I have observed that critics who view Benjy in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury merely as an element of the gothic or exclusively as a metaphor for the degeneration of the Old South fail to see the complexity of his function in the novel. Perhaps even more troubling to me is that these approaches tend to reinforce commonly held assumptions about persons with disabilities that are inaccurate at best and disempowering at the very least.

To respond to the failure of these traditional approaches, two things must happen. First, we need to be aware (and make our students aware) that disability functions in a variety of ways in literary texts. As Leonard Kriegel and Irving K. Zola, among others, have noted, many "canonical" literary texts do in fact present disability exclusively as metaphor and, in so doing, reflect and reinforce commonly-held stereotypes about persons with disabilities.

Douglas Biklen, Robert Bogdan, among others, have identified these stereotypes as including the following:

--the disabled person as pitiable and pathetic
--the disabled person as object of violence

--the disabled person as sinister and/or evil
--the disabled person as "atmosphere"
--the disabled person as "SuperCrip"
--the disabled person as laughable
--the disabled person as his/her own worst--and only--enemy
--the disabled person as burden
--the disabled person as nonsexual
--the disabled person as incapable of fully participating in everyday life

In other literary texts, some written by persons with disabilities and some not, the function of disability is not exclusively metaphorical and characters with disabilities are depicted as multidimensional. In my Ph.D. work in Southern studies, I have encountered an enormous amount of texts which problematize and sometimes directly challenge cultural assumptions about persons with disability. For example, in "Good Country People" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," Flannery O'Connor's treatment of characters who have obvious physical disabilities challenges the stereotype of the "charity cripple" and reinforces the idea that disability in large part is the product of the social relationships.

I am not suggesting that we "censor" or refuse to teach certain texts which present non-"PC" images of persons with disabilities or which reinforce stereotypes (we would have a very short list of texts to work with if we did). I do think that it is important to try to incorporate at least some texts which to some degree challenge stereotypes about persons with disabilities, and whenever possible to incorporate texts written by persons with disabilities, just as we try to incorporate texts which represent the experience of members of other traditionally

underrepresented groups.

Second, regardless of which texts we choose to teach, we need to be aware (and make our students aware) that all literary texts reflect to varying degrees the biases of the culture from which they emerge and that all readers carry with them their own biases as well. In other words, we must consider the cultural and historical biases of the texts we teach and, lest we think that we are immune to such biases, we must also consider what cultural and historical baggage we carry.

For example, in Dickens' A Christmas Carol--a text which is so culturally ingrained in us that we can imagine Scrooge as Mr. Magoo, a talking duck, and Bill Murray--we must ask to what degree Tiny Tim is a product of the Victorian tendency to sentimentalized disability, to view people with disabilities as objects of pity and charity. We must also ask to what degree we, who are exposed to March of Dimes poster children and the Jerry Lewis Telethon for muscular dystrophy, share these assumptions.

The second way we can incorporate disability studies texts into the composition classroom is, in courses which are structured around rhetorical modes, to use texts by "good" writers who are themselves disabled or who write about disability as "models" of good writing. This is the approach taken in composition textbooks which, for example, use Nancy Mairs' essay "On Being a Cripple" as a model for "Definition" or Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self" as a model for "Reflection." That these texts are also written by women, one of

whom is an African-American, enables the textbook editor to "kill two [or three] birds with one stone," so to speak. Even more importantly, this overlap reinforces the idea that disability, like gender and ethnicity, is not the sum total of an individual's identity.

In choosing textbooks for essential skills and introductory composition courses, I attempt find textbooks which included at least one selection by a person with disability and to avoid those which only address disability from the outside looking in: for example, if the textbook only had Gerbasi's article, I might not use it, but if it also had an essay by Mairs, I probably would. If a textbook had neither, then I might consider supplementing it by photocopying a text which fits into my course objectives and themes.

The third way to incorporate disability studies into the composition classroom is in courses organized around one or more disciplinary approaches. Most of the recently published scholarly work in disability studies is in the social sciences and, because this work reflects the paradigm shift from the "medical model" to the "minority model," these kinds of texts directly address the issue of diversity and cultural bias that literary and rhetorical approaches have a tendency to overlook.

In history, some of the most interesting texts trace this paradigm shift or recount the history of the disability rights movement from the Independent Living movement to the enactment of

the ADA. In philosophy, political science, and women's studies, most texts deal with the struggle to change social policy which directly affects the lives of people with disabilities. These kinds of texts could be easily integrated into composition courses organized around "the American experience" or around "movements" (such as the Civil Rights movement, the Women's movement, the Gay Rights movement, and the Men's movement). Given the media attention that the disability rights movement has received since the enactment of the ADA, it seems strange to me these kinds of texts have not yet appeared in interdisciplinary readers.

The bulk of recent texts on disability are sociological: for example, theoretical studies of social linguistics, group identity, stigma, stereotyping, prejudice, or controlled studies of attitudes and behavior. These kinds of texts are particularly well-suited to composition courses, especially courses organized around language and power. Because the specific issues raised by these texts are unfamiliar, students are forced to rethink their own individual and cultural assumptions about language and reexamine the ways in which context shapes meaning.

I have found that combining autobiographical texts like Harold Krentz's Darkness at Noon or Alice Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self" with sociological texts like Gordon Allport's work on "labels of primary potency" and prejudice elicits lively classroom discussions about the politics of language, about self-definition and power, about "political

correctness," as well as about broader issues of "diversity" and "tolerance."

These discussions, in turn, provide a foundation for writing assignments which draw on personal experience or on research and field work to explore the "social meaning" of particular words. For example, I assign a reflective essay in which students draw on their own experiences--either as one who is labeled, or as one who has labelled others according to membership in a particular group--to illustrate how labels shape thoughts and actions.

I also assign an analysis essay in which students draw on the Oxford English Dictionary or other appropriate reference materials and the results of a survey of their peers to examine the differences in connotation of two labels which denote membership in a particular group. While some students choose to examine what Paul Longmore and others have called "the language of disability," others address the ways in which other "languages" (for example, the language of gender or ethnicity) structure identity constructively and/or destructively. These assignments are then used to lead students into reading and writing about political language, advertising, censorship, or "political correctness."

As suggested by the previous point, the fourth way to integrate disability studies into the composition classroom is in courses organized around particular themes or subjects such as social/political "movements" or "the American experience." In an intermediate composition course organized around inter-

disciplinary approaches to contemporary ethical dilemmas, for example, I supplement the textbook (an anthology of philosophical and legal texts) with a reader which included literary texts, editorials from newspapers and news magazines, political cartoons, and "current events" articles detailing recent legal and social issues. Among these texts, I include several articles which explored the implications of certain positions and policies for persons with disabilities: for example, fetal abnormality as grounds for abortion, "quality of life" as a consideration in passive/active euthanasia, low IQ scores as a "mitigating" factor in sentencing capital crimes.

Two of the most widely used subjects or themes around which composition courses are organized--popular culture and cross/multi-cultural experience--seem particularly well-suited to the use of disability studies sources and texts. There are many secondary which deal with representations of disability in popular culture--for example, Irving K. Zola's study of the function of disability in detective fiction and Lauri E. Klobas' study of disability in television drama--and an almost limitless number of primary sources.

In fact, as I was sitting in front of the television while I was sorting through my files to prepare this paper, by default--the remote was out of reach--I wound up watching an interview with Bobby Hurley, a basketball player for the Sacramento Kings who was severely injured several months ago in an automobile accident. He was not expected to survive, let alone ever return

to the basketball court. I watched this story of the disabled athlete overcoming adversity, and was impressed with the way it depicted the struggle as a work in progress. The way in which Bobby Hurley's story was handled illustrates a positive change in the way disability is presented in the media. This was not a sensationalistic story of overcoming the odds told after the fact. It didn't glamorize the struggle: it showed the obstacles--both physical and psychological--that Bobby Hurley is facing.

Currently, popular culture, perhaps more than any other available source, reflects an increasing awareness of disability as a social relationship and not merely a physical condition. Prime time network television series have presented fully developed characters with disabilities: for example, Corky in Like Goes On and Benny in LA Law.

Advertisements in print and on television for products aimed at a broad audience (like beer and fast food) present people with disabilities as attractive, confident, and socially active and, perhaps most significantly, target people with disabilities as consumers, as a market worth capturing.

Feature films like The Water Dance and Passion Fish which explore the experiences of people with disabilities as a primary theme provide an alternative to the more typical secondary roles of victim or villain. In addition, it is becoming more common for Hollywood and Madison Avenue to use persons with disabilities to play themselves: for example, Marlee Matlin--who has appeared

in television and in feature films and received an Oscar for her role in Children of a Lesser God--is hearing impairing and Chris Burke, who plays Corky on Life Goes On, has Down's syndrome.

There are, admittedly, less positive images: for example, the annual Jerry Lewis telethon which pleads with us to give our change (and our pity) to "Jerry's kids"; advertisements which reflect tokenism or reinforce positive, yet unrealistic, images of people with disabilities; daytime talk shows, the "freak shows" of the late 20th century, which parade the strange, the abnormal, and the taboo across their stages; and last, and certainly least, the sensationalistic accounts of the trials of John Wayne Bobbitt on both "legitimate" and tabloid news programs.

Pop culture is a mixed bag when it comes to representations of disability; it reflects the process of change, the contradictions, the diverse views of the American population. For this reason, courses organized around popular culture can and should incorporate some disability studies materials--primary and/or secondary sources--into discussions of advertising, television, film, pop fiction, comic books, cartoons, or other popular culture artifacts.

Like courses organized thematically around popular culture, courses organized around multicultural or minority group experience also seem well-suited to the use of disability studies texts. With the enactment of the ADA, persons with disabilities are viewed legally as members of a minority group and are

protected by law against discrimination. Although the concept of a culture of disability may seem foreign, it is no more so than other "cultures" comprised of people who share social (rather than ethnic or racial) characteristics and experiences.

Applying this broader notion of culture in a course organized thematically around the Other--defined as anything or anyone different from oneself--I have constructed my own reader: a collection of interdisciplinary texts about the physical, racial, sexual, social, cultural, and species "alien." As the final paper in the course, I assign an analysis of a film entitled, The Brother from Another Planet, in which a black alien who lacks the ability to communicate through speech and has three toes on each foot instead of five, crash lands his spaceship in on Ellis Island and winds up in Harlem.

This example suggests some of the difficulties involved in integrating disability studies into composition curriculum, but it also suggests some of the possibilities. As more textbooks include texts by and about people with disabilities and more of us begin to ask for them--just as we asked for texts which reflect diversity along the lines of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual preference--textbook editors and publishers will have to give us an answer.

SOURCES--THE BEGINNING OF A LIST

I. "LITERARY" APPROACHES

FICTION

Bellow, The Adventures of Augie March

Conrad, The Secret Agent

Crane, "The Monster"

Dickens, A Christmas Carol
Bleak House
David Copperfield
Great Expectations
The Old Curiosity Shop

Dostoyevsky, The Idiot
Eliot, The Mill on the Floss

Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury
The Hamlet

Flaubert, Madame Bovary

Freeman, "A Mistaken Charity"

Hawthorne, "The Birthmark"

Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises

Howells, A Hazard of New Fortunes

Hugo, The Hunchback of Notre Dame

James, Wings of a Dove
Portrait of a Lady

Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Lardner, "Champion"

Lawrence, Lady Chatterly's Lover

Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

Mason, In Country
"A New Wave Format"

McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter
The Ballad of Sad Cafe

Melville, Moby Dick
The Confidence Man
Billy Budd

O'Connor, "Good Country People"
"The Lame Shall Enter First"
"The Life You Save May Be Your Own"
The Violent Bear It Away
"Wildcat"

Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men

Trumbo, Johnny Got His Gun

Tyler, "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters"
The Accidental Tourist

Wells, "The Country of the Blind"

Welty, Delta Wedding
"First Love"
"Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden"
"The Key"

West, Miss Lonelyhearts

DRAMA/POETRY

Browning, E. B. Aurora Leigh

Clark, Whose Life Is It Anyway?

Gibson, The Miracle Worker

Medoff, Children of a Lesser God

Pomerance, The Elephant Man

Rostand, Cyrano de Bergerac

Shakespeare, Richard III
King Lear

Sophocles, The Theban Plays

Williams, The Glass Menagerie

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II. RHETORICAL APPROACHES

TEXTS BY AND ABOUT PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN USE

Allport, Gordon. The Language of Prejudice

Gerbasi, Barbara. "Mainstreaming My Son."

Keller, Helen. The Story of My Life

Krentz, Harold. Darkness at Noon

Mairs, Nancy. "Disability" & "On Being a Cripple"

Walker, Alice. "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self"

III. DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES:

A. HISTORY

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B. SOCIOLOGY/SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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IV. THEMATIC APPROACHES:

A. POPULAR CULTURE

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LITERATURE BY AND ABOUT PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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